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AUTHOR Perlman, Carole L.; Rice, William K., Jr.
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ABSTRACT

The English language portions of appropriate levels of the Language Assessment Scales (LAS) were administered to 193 English-speaking monolingual elementary school students. The students were aged 5-14, and had average reading achievement scores on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills. On the basis of the publisher's norms, maturational trends in scores were found. A high percentage of the English-speaking sample, especially the 5- to 7-year-olds, were inappropriately classified as being non-English speaking or as having limited English fluency. Thus, the test's ability to classify correctly levels of English fluency was questioned. Because of the definite developmental trend observed, it was also recommended that separate norms be established for the different age groups (5-10 years) who are administered the LAS-1. (GDC)

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A Normative Study of a Test of
English Language Proficiency

Perlman, Carole L. and
Rice, William K., Jr.

Chicago Board of Education
Department of Research and Evaluation

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Abstract

The English portions of appropriate levels of the Language Assessment Scales (LAS) were administered to 193 monolingual English speaking 5- through 14-year-olds. The students were randomly selected from schools in a large urban district in the midwest. On the basis of the publisher's norms, maturational trends were found and a high percentage of these students, especially the 5- through 7-year-olds, were classified as being non-English speaking or having limited English fluency. Implications of using the LAS on a limited English speaking population are discussed.

Following the United States Supreme Court decision in *Lau vs. Nichols*, an increasing number of state legislatures have passed laws requiring that local educational agencies provide the limited-English-speaking-ability (LESA) student with equal educational opportunity through various bilingual educational programs. Because of the need for extra staff, reduced class size and additional materials and equipment, special programs for LESA students may be twice as expensive per child as the regular educational program. Since these programs tend to be costly and since school funds are limited, effective resource allocation dictates that the decision to place a child in a bilingual program be made with considerable care. Thus, it is important that the method(s) to be used to classify a student's English ability are as accurate as possible.

The increased need to classify students according to English ability has resulted in a large number of tests that purport to measure English proficiency. One of the few instruments developed from a theoretical base and having a sound psychometric structure is the Language Assessment Scales (LAS) (De Avila and Duncan, 1975, 1977).

The LAS 1 is administered to students 5-10 years old; the LAS 2 is intended for older children. The test authors have established cutoff points for the classification of students into five levels of English proficiency. These levels are defined as follows:

<u>Proficiency Level</u>	<u>Description</u>	<u>LAS I Cutoffs</u>	<u>LAS II Cutoffs</u>
1	Non-English speaking; total linguistic deficiencies	0-54	0-61
2	Non-English speaking; apparent linguistic deficiencies	55-64	62-71
3	Limited English fluency	65-74	72-81
4	Near-native fluency	75-84	82-91
5	Native fluency	85-100	92-100

The publisher reports the results of reliability, validity and norming studies which indicate that the LAS is internally reliable with reliabilities of about .90 for the total test within each age level. The validity study suggests that the test is able to discriminate between English-speaking students and students of limited English-speaking ability. However, there is no error rate given to indicate the number of false negatives, i.e., the number of students who are classified as being limited English-speaking when they are really native English speakers. The English norming study conducted on monolingual English speakers from the southwestern United States indicated that there was no maturational effect with the mean for all age levels near the ceiling of the test.

If a test is to be used in the assignment of students to bilingual programs, it is desirable to see how non-bilingual students perform on the test. Ideally, Anglo students should be classified as being fluent in English.

This study specifically investigates the LAS error rate for false negatives in a midwestern urban population. If the error rate for false negatives is relatively small, the missallocation of educational resources will be small in terms of providing bilingual programs for students that do not need this type of educational assistance.

Method

Five schools were chosen to participate in this study. All were K-8 schools whose students performed near the citywide median on the May 1977 Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS) reading test. Mean ITBS reading scores are given in Table 1. The student bodies of two of the schools were predominantly white and three other were predominantly black.

Table 1

ITBS Reading Means for Anglo Norming
Study Program Participants*

Age	ITBS Reading Score			Citywide Mean Score
	Mean	S.D.	N	
8	3.0	1.0	15	2.8
9	4.0	1.4	14	3.4
10	4.1	1.2	18	3.9
11	4.8	1.6	16	4.6
12	5.4	1.7	18	5.3
13	6.3	1.7	19	6.1

*The ITBS was administered seven months prior to the current study, so that, e.g., the data presented for 9-year-olds represents scores obtained when those students were 8 years old.

At each school, a total of approximately 40 students were randomly selected within age groups. Students were excluded from the sample if they came from homes in which a language other than English is normally spoken. This rarely occurred since the five participating schools were chosen partly because of their small bilingual populations. All testing took place during December 1977.

All testers were Research and Evaluation staff who had received intensive in-service training in the administration and scoring of the LAS. Ss were given an appropriate level of the LAS (Level 1 for ages five to ten and Level 2 for ages 11 to 14).

Results

Mean scores for each age group are given in Table 2.

Table 2: LAS Anglo Norms

<u>Age</u>	<u>LAS Level</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>S.D.</u>	<u>N</u>
5	1	61.1	16.3	18
6	1	65.8	16.2	21
7	1	73.7	16.0	26
8	1	80.5	14.1	22
9	1	77.2	14.9	19
10	1	85.0	11.2	24
11	2	81.8	11.9	20
12	2	81.9	10.9	19
13	2	84.0	14.9	20
14	2	88.5	10.7	4

The data indicate that there is a strong developmental trend in scores on the LAS 1, with mean scores for 10-year-olds nearly 14 points above the mean for 5-year-olds. The data in Table 3 show what happens when the Ss are classified into the test author's five English language proficiency categories.

Table 3: LAS Classification Summary

Age Cycle	Percent in Each Proficiency Category					Total Percent Non-English Speaking or <u>Limited Fluency</u>	<u>N</u>
	Non-English		Native English				
	Speaking		Speaking				
	1	2	3	4	5		
5*	38.9	33.3	5.6	5.6	16.7	77.8	18
6	23.8	23.8	23.8	14.3	14.3	71.4	21
7	11.5	11.5	30.8	19.2	26.9	53.8	26
8	4.5	13.6	13.6	18.2	50.0	31.7	22
9	10.5	10.5	15.8	15.8	47.4	36.8	19
10	0.0	8.3	4.2	29.2	58.3	12.5	24
11**	5.0	20.0	15.0	40.0	20.0	40.0	20
12	5.3	5.3	42.1	26.3	21.1	52.7	19
13	10.0	0.0	25.0	3.0	35.0	35.0	20
14	0.0	0.0	25.0	25.0	50.0	25.0	4

*LAS Level 1 was administered to Ss aged 5-10.

**LAS Level 2 was administered to Ss aged 11-14.

It is evident from the data in Table 3 that the misclassification rate is high, especially for very young children, approximately three-fourths of the monolingual English five-and six-year olds were categorized as being non-English speaking or having only limited English fluency.

Discussion

Two basic conclusions can be drawn from the data obtained. The first is that there is a definite developmental trend in LAS scores for monolingual English 5- to 10-year-olds. A similar trend was noted in a study using bilingual pupils (Chicago Board of Education, 1978). It therefore seems inappropriate to use the same set of norms for everyone to whom the LAS 1 is administered. Separate norms should be established for each age group.

The second conclusion is that using the author's norms, there is an unacceptably high rate of false negatives, i.e., monolingual English students who would be classified as needing a bilingual program. If normal monolingual English children perform poorly on the test, it is difficult to see how pupils from non-English backgrounds could be expected to be classified as fluent in English, even if they are actually very proficient. Analysis of the individual items and the written comments of the testing staff indicated major areas of difficulty with the LAS. Some of the individual items were especially troublesome. For example, in the Minimal Sound Pair sections, almost no Ss were able to distinguish between "whether" and "weather". The tapes were sometimes hard to understand some of the pictorial stimuli were unintentionally ambiguous. Portions of the content of the story in the LAS do not meet the goal of cultural relevance discussed in the LAS rationale (De Avila & Duncan, 1975).

Because of problems with the administration and norming of the LAS, it is of highly questionable utility as a classification device for children from non-English backgrounds. Revisions of the tests and a modification of the norms are essential before the LAS can be used to determine who must be enrolled in bilingual educational programs.

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